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WARTON LECTURE ON ENGLISH POETRY

XI

Lord Byron :
Arnold and Swinburne

By

Professor H. J. C. Grierson

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XI

LORD BYRON: ARNOLD AND SWINBURNE

By PROFESSOR H. J. C. GRIERSON

Read November 24, 1920

I

It will next year be forty years¹ since Matthew Arnold, in the preface to a selection from the Poetry of Byron, made the claim for Wordsworth and Byron which awakened in Swinburne a fury of eloquent anger, and served for the time to depreciate rather than to enhance the reputation of the younger but far more widely celebrated poet. 'Wordsworth and Byron', he told us, 'stand, it seems to me, first and pre-eminent in actual performance, a glorious pair, among the English poets of this century. Keats had probably a more consummate poetic gift than either of them; but he died having produced too little, and being as yet too immature to rival them. I, for my part, can never even think of equalling with them any other of their contemporaries, either Coleridge, poet and philosopher, wrecked in a mist of opium; or Shelley, beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain. Wordsworth and Byron stand out by themselves. When the year 1900 is turned, and our nation comes to recount her poetic glories in the century which has then just ended, the first names with her will be these.'

The immediate effect of Arnold's challenge was not to enhance the reputation of Byron, but rather to dispel the glamour which still for many minds invested his almost legendary name. 'Byron is dead', Carlyle and Jane Welsh had written to one another in 1824, in a tone of awe; 'Byron is dead', Tennyson scratched on a rock, 'on a day when the whole world seemed darkened for me'. That feeling had departed, and not a few readers of Arnold's selections felt as though scales had fallen from their eyes, and they realized that for them the poetry of Byron was valueless—wanting in art, felicity of

¹ *Poetry of Byron chosen and arranged by Matthew Arnold, 1831.*

phrase, and harmony of verse, deficient in real depth of inspiration. 'A line of Wordsworth's', Lamb had written, when he too heard of Byron's death, 'is a lever to lift the immortal spirit! Byron can only move the spleen. He was at best a Satyrst,—in any other way he was mean enough.'

But this was not quite the point of view of the critics of the 'eighties and 'nineties of last century. They did not write as champions of Wordsworth. While paying due respect to Wordsworth, Swinburne championed against both poets the claims of Coleridge and Shelley; and among those who followed Swinburne to the charge there were not wanting depreciators of Wordsworth too. It was no 'moral Clytemnestra' that struck Byron down again, no champion of the peculiar English blend of honest prudery and hypocritical respectability, such as drove him from England in 1816, nor yet of that higher, purer spirituality which Lamb is thinking of when he speaks of Wordsworth's verse as 'a lever to lift the immortal spirit'. It was in the name, not of morals, but of art, that Byron was arraigned by the poets of the 'sweet new style' of Rossetti and Morris and Swinburne. He was stricken in the house of his friends in another sense than in 1815, treated with contumely by those who had entered most fully into the inheritance of artistic freedom, freedom in the choice of subject and the portrayal of passion, exemption from the pressure of the spirit which would have all poetry be edifying, for which Byron in his own way—without any theory of art for art's sake—had fought a single-handed and splendid battle. His was a harder fate but a robuster spirit than that of the poet whose health of body and peace of mind were impaired by an article on *The Fleshly School*:

'Tis strange the mind, that very fiery particle,
Should let itself be snuffed out by an article,

or even of the turbulent young man the audacities of whose *Poems and Ballads* were so purely literary and reconstructive achievements.

For it was the author of *Poems and Ballads*, a volume which roused the moral British public as nothing had done since *Cain* and *Don Juan*, who led the assault; and, forgetting the generous, discriminating and eloquent appreciation with which in 1866 he prefaced a happier selection than Arnold's, proceeded now to empty upon Byron's head the frothing vials of his shrill and exuberant vituperation. He was followed, after a preliminary protest in *Letters to Dead Authors*:

Ah! were you here, I wonder would you flutter
O'er such a foe the tempest of your wing,

by Andrew Lang; and Mr. Saintsbury, whose admiration of the Rossetti-Morris-Swinburne group is unabated, joined in the cry and has pursued Byron's reputation ever since with a curious rancour which has not coloured his often equally severe criticism of Wordsworth and his heresies. Only Henley refused to take part in the 'pogrom'; and he alas! died before completing his work as champion, critic, and editor of Byron.

But the names of the critics who condemned as of the one who stood aloof are significant, for it is not entirely to be wondered that the school of Rossetti and Morris and Pater and Swinburne and Andrew Lang did not respond appreciatively to the challenge of Matthew Arnold and subscribe to the poetic greatness of Byron. Between his poetry and theirs was no medium except the freedom from moralist restrictions to which I have referred. In the poetry of the pre-Raphaelites, as one may for convenience call them, one phase of the Romantic Revival—not the whole of that complex phenomenon, but an aspect which it had presented from the date of Percy's *Reliques* and Chatterton's *Rowley Poems* to *The Blessed Damozel* and *Atalanta in Calydon*—attained its most complete manifestation. Never has there been in English literature a more cunningly wrought poetry of artistic reconstruction, the reconstruction of old moods and old modes, Greek or Mediaeval, especially the latter. Percy's faked ballads, Chatterton's faked Middle English, are crude things compared with the sophisticated mediaevalism of *The Blessed Damozel*, the romantic historic ballad as reconstructed by Rossetti in *The King's Tragedy*, or in those border ballads of Swinburne's which Mr. Gosse has published since that poet's death. And what of the same poet's *canzoni* and roundels, and *sestine* and double *sestine*, and carols and miracle play? Russell Lowell's complaint as to *Atalanta* and *Ercehtheus* came just to this, that they were too like the original. But it is not a mere matter of this or that precise form revived. The whole tone and tune, spirit and art of Morris's *Defence of Guenevere* poems, with his mediaeval retelling of old stories in the manner of Chaucer, of Rossetti's ballads and *House of Life*, of Swinburne's poems, pagan or mediaeval, is a reconstruction of old moods of feeling, of old fashions of utterance. Never was a poet at once so spontaneous and so purely literary as Swinburne. His poems are not, as Byron's or Burns's, the vibrating response to the agitations of experience and passion—'the dream of my sleeping passions—their somnambulism' to use Byron's own phrase, which is, I suppose, just Wordsworth's 'emotion recollected in tranquillity'. Swinburne's are the record of emotions begotten in the library, begotten of overmuch

reading of Elizabethan plays and Greek tragedy and lyric, and Old French and Italian song, or if his inspiration is more modern he sings of liberty and babies and the sea, as Victor Hugo had done before him.

Was it any wonder that these masters of cunning technique, goldsmiths who could carve and chase with the art of a Benvenuto Cellini cups and chalices of antique fashion, or the lesser moulders of ballads in blue china, fragrant with the *pot-pourri* of the romantic Middle Ages, were startled and indignant when commanded to do reverence to the crudities of Byron's earliest verses, the flamboyant improvisations of his verse tales and even of the greater *Childe Harold*, supported by short selections from the rich and abounding life of that shocking and delightful poem *Don Juan*, that great epic of modern Europe? All attempts to rehabilitate Byron, Professor Saintsbury felt able to declare in 1896, 'have certainly never yet succeeded either with the majority of competent critics or with the majority of readers of poetry'. And in his vivacious record of personal adventures in the French novel he tells us roundly that while Byronism did much mischief on the Continent, 'with us, though it made a great stir, it really did little harm except to some "silly women." . . . Counter-jumpers like Thackeray's own Pogson worshipped "the noble poet"; boys of nobler stamp like Tennyson *thought* they worshipped him, but if they were going to become men of affairs forgot all about him; if they were to be poets took to Keats and Shelley as models, not to him. Critics hardly took him seriously, except for non-literary reasons.'

But Byronism is not quite the same thing as Byron. Nor, rare and artistic poets as they are, do the names of Tennyson, Rossetti, Morris, and Swinburne represent all the qualities that make poetry great and satisfying. The *Idylls of the King* and *In Memoriam*, *The Blessed Damozel* and the *House of Life*, *Two Red Roses across the Moon* and *The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon*, *Atalanta in Calydon*, and *Tristram of Lyonesse*—these are precious wrought works of art such as Byron could never have composed, no more than his imagination could have lived and sported in the rarefied and enchanting atmosphere of the *Witch of Atlas* or sung the nympholeptic strains of *Epipsychidion*. But is it quite certain that they are in every respect greater poems than the last cantos of *Childe Harold* or Byron's *Prometheus* or *Cain* or *The Vision of Judgment* or *Don Juan*? Of Shelley I will speak later; but regarding the others I confess I do not feel so sure as when I was a student in the 'eighties of last century. Their beauty seems to me a beauty of things somewhat

remote from life ; the languid passion of Morris, the stormier music of Swinburne seem to breathe of a land indeed east of the sun and west of the moon. It is in a very timid fashion after all that Tennyson in the finished stanzas of *In Memoriam*, or even the robust Browning of *Christmas Eve and Easter Day* ventured into the stormy waters of doubt, death, and the tragic hints of the significance of life, timidly keeping the bathing machine of an orthodox and optimistic faith well in sight upon the beach as a shelter to run to for safety and warmth and reinvigoration :

O yet we trust that somehow good
Will be the final goal of ill.

And so even the exquisite art of these poems seems touched with decadence, as Shelley found the erotic poets of Greece decadent, not from any quality they possess but because of what they lack ; and some of the qualities they want I seem to rediscover in the less finished, more obviously faulty, poetry of Byron—life and strength, passion and virility, wit and humour. ‘Close your Byron ; open your Goethe’, says Carlyle ; but for Goethe most English readers and critics have inclined to substitute Wordsworth. ‘Close your Byron ; open your Keats and Tennyson and Rossetti and Swinburne’, says, or might say, Professor Saintsbury, ‘for here is art, “the faultless and fervent melodies” of pure poetry, not the resonant improvisations and vulgar discords of Byron’s rhetoric.’ Yet the serene wisdom and golden beauty of Goethe, the ministering medicine of Wordsworth’s hills and streams and leech-gatherers, the melody and colour of Keats and Tennyson, the exotic passion and music of Rossetti and Swinburne, sometimes pall ; and it is with a powerful quickening of our blood that we hear again the rolling guns and clattering squadrons of the stanzas on Waterloo, the storm and passion of the night by Lake Lemán. The old thrill comes back when we read again of ‘the Niobe of nations’,

Childless and crownless in her voiceless woe,

her tombs and ruined Forum, the empty moonlit Coliseum ; or hear the old moral, in accents of reverberating intensity, of the vanity of human life, the intoxicating sweetness of love, the sublimity and indifference of nature. Goethe and Wordsworth speak of wisdom and love, of duty and resignation :

Entbehren sollst du, sollst entbehren ;

but folly and rebellion and hatred appeal to our complex nature also, and we can at times turn with relief from the *Leech-gatherer* or the second part of *Faust* to enjoy the scorn and mockery, the buoyant

humour and splendid satire of *Beppo* and the *Vision of Judgment* and *Don Juan*. It is, at least, not without significance that while Arnold and Swinburne were debating and mid-Victorian criticism was passing final sentence on Byron, a young poet was just about to repeat in a measure the experience for his readers and for himself of the Byron of *Childe Harold* and the tales and some of the earlier lyrics. Mr. Kipling has been, I sometimes think, 'le Byron de nos jours', not in the sense of Browning's poem, but in virtue of the quickening and immediate effect of his poetry on an audience as wide at least as the English-speaking world, an audience not confined to the usual readers of poetry; and because Mr. Kipling, too, found the best material for romance and song, not in the reconstructed world of Greece or the Middle Ages, but in the actualities of life in his own day in India and England, the army, the workshop, and the tramp-steamer. The romantic and Hellenic revival was yet to produce some exquisite poetry, as that of Mr. Yeats; but on the whole the trend of poetry, since Mr. Arnold's prophetic date has passed, has been in the direction of a simpler art, a closer touch with actuality; and it is this which has tempted me to ask myself whether, now that Byronism is certainly a thing of the past, Byron may not yet be alive, and if so what are the elements in his work which have proved most enduring.

II

The influence of Byron on the best minds of his own generation has, I think, never been better expressed than by the late Mr. William Hale White in *The Revolution in Tanner's Lane*, and, though it is a work of fiction, one could easily make it good from the evidence of Ruskin and others. 'Zachariah', he says, speaking of his hero, 'found in the *Corsair* exactly what answered to his own inmost self, down to its very depths. The lofty style, the scorn of what is mean and base, the courage—root of all virtue—that dares and evermore dares in the very last extremity, the love of the illimitable, of freedom, and the cadences like the fall of waves on a sea-shore, were attractive to him beyond measure. More than this, there was love. His own love was a failure, and yet it was impossible for him to indulge for a moment his imagination elsewhere. . . But when he came to Medora's song—

Deep in my soul that tender secret dwells,
 Lonely and lost to light for evermore,
 Save when to thine my heart responsive swells,
 Then trembles into silence as before.

and more particularly the second verse—

There, in its centre, a sepulchral lamp
Burns the slow flame, eternal—but unseen;
Which not the darkness of Despair can damp,
Though vain its ray as it had never been.

love again asserted itself. It was not love for a person; perhaps it was hardly love so much as the capacity for love. Whatever it may be, henceforth this is what love will be in him, and it will be fully maintained, though it knows no actual object. It will manifest itself in suppressed force, seeking for exit in a thousand directions; sometimes grotesque perhaps, but always force. It will give energy to expression, vitality to his admiration of the beautiful, devotion to his worship, enthusiasm to his zeal for freedom.' This is how Byron spoke to many of his own generation besides silly women and underbred Pogsons, and it goes to the heart of the matter. They heard again the authentic tones of passionate feeling; felt life and love reclaiming their rights from prudence and morality; poetry reasserting itself as something more than 'the art of uniting pleasure with truth by calling imagination to the help of reason'. Such an emancipation, indeed, had already begun, unmarked in Blake's poetry, disguised in the *Lyrical Ballads* by the poets' choice of theme, of other passions than that of love,—maternal affection—the affections in short rather than love as between the sexes, and a new and profound, passionate, and mystical love of nature. In the region of passion, in the more limited sense of the word, Coleridge was never more than a sentimentalist, a metaphysical sentimentalist or sentimental metaphysician. Wordsworth, it would seem, had indeed been a passionate lover, but that phase was soon over, that impulse cut somewhat deliberately out of his experience, and he had become the lover who could spend his honeymoon walking with Mary on one side and Dorothy on the other while he contemplated nature and meditated political sonnets. Byron was a lover, masculine and passionate, as Donne and Burns had been before him. He was no nympholept like Shelley; he could never have written *Epipsychidion*. Keats's sensuousness, the temperament to which the 'lucent syrups tinct with cinnamon' and dishes of gold and silver 'filling the chilly room with perfume light' were as entrancing as the soul of Madeline, offended Byron on the personal side, and he was not quite artist enough in words to appreciate the felicity of Keats's sensuous diction. For Byron, strange as it may seem, was not a sensual, he was not even a sensuous poet. Love was for him a passion in which soul and

sense are inextricably blended. The love he exalts is an unchangeable, a spiritual passion :

But this was taught me by the dove,
To die—and know no second love.

And let the fool still prone to range
And sneer at all who cannot change
Partake his jest with boasting boys ;
I envy not his varied joys ;
But deem such feeble, heartless man,
Less than yon solitary swan ;
Far, far beneath the shallow maid
He left believing and betrayed.

In commenting on some of Burns's unpublished letters, he declares : 'A true voluptuary will never abandon his mind to the grossness of reality. It is by excluding the earthly, the material, the *physique* of our pleasures, by veiling these ideas, by forgetting them altogether or, at least, never naming them hardly to oneself, that we alone can prevent them from disgusting.'

When Southey denounced the Satanic School of poetry, the school of Byron and Shelley, it was *Cain* and religious scepticism he had chiefly in view, but also *Don Juan* and this note of passion. And it is Byron's most essential contribution to the quickening of English poetry, the note which echoed in Zachariah's heart with inspiring, liberating, ennobling effect. For the Satanic poet, if a troubler of the waters, may give them in troubling the power to invigorate the human spirit. He is the poet who, like Donne or Marlowe, Byron or the Swinburne of the first *Poems and Ballads*, shocks and startles and also enchants his age by the challenge which his poetry offers to the accepted moral conventions, disturbing its scale of moral values, especially the accord which every age endeavours to secure between morals and art. For art and poetry are the spontaneous expression of man's sense of values, the record of his joys, his loves and hates, his need of beauty, of pleasure, the demand of the spirit of man that he shall not only live but live well. But the concern of morality is not so much immediate pleasure as the necessity of making us take pleasure in the right things, *ἡδεσθαι οἷς δεῖ*, and knowing the power of poetry the moralist would fain enlist her services, and moralize the poet's song. But if, like Plato, he is both a great moralist and a poet, he knows that it is not easy to curb the wild, free spirit of poetry, so apt to reveal to men what they really love and hate, which are not always the things society would have us hate and love ; he knows that there is no room in a Republic where natural impulses are

to be disciplined or eradicated for the poet who waters our natural desires. He calls the poet a liar, but what he really fears is his terrible, his revealing sincerity; it may be unconscious sincerity, for poets least of all men know what they are about.

And the moralist would be right. It would be true to say with Dryden that 'supposing verses are never so beautiful and pleasing yet if they contain anything which shocks Religion or Good Manners they are at best . . . *versus inopes rerum, nugaeque canorae*'; that might be true if articulate morality in any age ever represented quite adequately the deepest and most enduring needs of our nature in conflict with, striving to curb and correct, the aberrations of feeling and the allurements of the moment. But articulate morality is in great measure the expression of the real or fancied needs of a type of society seeking to establish or protect itself, of a creed or a convention resisting troublesome inquiry and disturbance; and the human spirit faints and the sense of the joy of life is dulled; and then a Marlowe comes singing of the soaring ambitions of a Tamburlaine, of Dr. Faustus imperilling his immortal welfare that he might make blind Homer sing to him 'of Alexander's love and Oenon's death', and might see again the face

that launched a thousand ships
And burned the topless towers of Ilium.

He will not even, like Spenser, endeavour to disguise his passion for beauty and power, from himself and from others, by a veil of allegory and conventional homage to the restrictive virtues; and so the air is cleared, the whole gamut of passionate experience is set open to Shakespeare, and the human spirit recovers the sense of its own infinite capacity, the joy of energy which is life and delight. 'The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom.'

It was just so that the *Giaour* and the *Corsair* and the *Bride of Abydos* and *Parisina* spoke to the generation of Mr. White's Zachariah, after a century of moralizing, reflective, sentimental poetry, admirable in its kind. This is what gave to Byron's verse-tales their superior charm to Scott's. Scott's setting and scenery are to me often preferable to Byron's; his tone saner, more genial. But the setting and scenery are everything, the characters and sentiments entirely negligible, while the style, if not more careless than Byron's, has more of cheap and facile phrasing and filling. With Byron the Greek and Mediterranean setting is in itself of small importance. The appeal that the south, the Mediterranean, made to Byron, as to Marlowe and to Goethe, was that of lands where passions are more

intense and more unrestrained. And if the Byronism of Byron's tales has lost its appeal, rather repels now than attracts us, one must not go to the other extreme and lose sight of the sincerity and intensity of feeling which quickened and still quickens these faulty poems, gave them in their first freshness such power and beauty. Byron has delineated as Wordsworth and none of his contemporaries did passion and energy. His central theme is the infinite worth of love and courage and endurance. If the immediate result in English poetry was a hasty crop of crude and absurd Oriental tales, yet the true inheritors of the spirit of Byron were, firstly, those poets who after the reaction to edification and sentiment of the first Victorian generation reasserted the rights in poetry of passion and the free imagination, Rossetti, Swinburne, Morris, greater artists but less potent personalities; and, secondly, Kipling and his generation, who brought poetry back from a too exotic cult of technique and strange moods to the passions and humours, loves and hates of the world around us. Byron did in these poems, as Tennyson said, 'give the world another heart and new pulses, and so we are kept going'.

III

But the passionate quality of Byron's tales and lyrics has suffered for us from the comparative poverty both of the thought in which the feeling becomes articulate and of the language in which the thought is clothed. Donne's songs and sonnets have reasserted their worth, after a long interval, because passion made Donne a subtle and at times even a profound thinker, and because his style, if harsh and careless, is never banal, and often splendidly felicitous. Byron has occasional splendid felicities too:

She walks in beauty like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies.

There be none of Beauty's daughters
With a magic like thee,
And like music on the waters
Is thy sweet voice to me.

In fact the few of Byron's lyrics which are really excellent stand out by themselves in an anthology of contemporary lyrics somewhat as Jonson's do in an Elizabethan collection; not better than their fellows, indeed in many respects less exquisitely lyrical than the songs of Shakespeare and Dekker, of Shelley and Scott, but with a rhetoric, a combined felicity and force, momentum, which is all their own. But in the tales Byron's style, compared with the best work of Wordsworth or Coleridge or Keats, is vehement declamation verging at times on

the banal. We feel as though some fierce blind mood were blundering round the bars of language unable to win its way to the light ; as if the poet were unable to find and to give the relief which would come from more perfect expression, from lines like Shakespeare's :

I am dying, Egypt, dying ; only,
I here importune death awhile, until
Of many thousand kisses the poor last
I lay upon thy lips.

Shakespeare finds the perfect words. Byron just misses. Like the tiger of his own comparison he springs, but is baffled and goes growling back to his lair. Yet that is not quite the whole truth, for verse is itself expression, and the pulse and movement even of this early verse betrays the passion which the words do not quite adequately convey. 'No verse narrative', says Professor Elton, 'has the same pace and energy and flame'. For flame one would be tempted to substitute fire, the dark fire of which Donne speaks, which heats but does not illuminate ; but not alone no narrative but no English verse, narrative or lyrical, had given such an impression of momentum (except it be some parts of Dryden's and Pope's satire) and none such an impression of speed as Byron's octosyllabics or the anapaests of *The Destruction of Sennacherib* ; and no poet reproduced the same impression until Swinburne. Swinburne's achievement as a metrist might be described as a union of the music of Shelley with the momentum and speed of Byron, the music more elaborately orchestral, the speed more winged, yet with loss as well as gain, the music of brass and wood for the wail of Shelley's violin, the speed but not all the momentum of Byron's fierce and tormented temperament.

An orator, and a great, passionate improviser, that is what Byron appears when one thinks of his octosyllabics and 'Christabel' measure, his Spenserians and later, better decasyllabics compared with the more delicate and perfect harmonies of Coleridge and Shelley, the rich and felicitous sensuousness of Keats and his Victorian followers ; but it is to these oratorical qualities, this strain of passionate improvisation that his poetry owed its immediate effectiveness, its success with circles in which the inspired 'silly sooth' of Wordsworth, the rarefied harmony of Shelley, 'singing hymns unbidden in the light of thought', the sensuous and imaginative felicities of the *Ode to a Nightingale* and the *Grecian Urn* made little appeal. Byron spoke to such readers—and he still, I find, speaks to many if they read poetry at all—and spoke with some of the oratorical force of Dryden and the more passionate strain of Donne and Marlowe, because he spoke as a poet who was also a man and a man of the world. Just as Burns was

a great poet who was also a peasant, a peasant who really lived the life and shared the joys of peasants, not like Clare a poet born by accident in a peasant's hut and 'gifted for poetry by those very qualities which made him ineffective as a peasant', and as Mr. Kipling is—if one may say so admiringly and without offence—a poet who is also a brilliant journalist, so Byron was a poet who was also a man among men and a man of the world, seeing the world with which he was at war through the world's eyes. Poetry such as this will necessarily lack some of the finest shades and harmonies. It will generally lack the note of pure song—unless, like the peasant song of Burns, tradition has kept song pure yet simple in feeling—and it will want the note of mystic, inward reverie. Not for quite common ears, either of peasant or man of the world, are such strains as :

Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.

or :

Liquid Peneus was flowing,
And all dark Tempe lay
In Pelion's shadow outgrowing
The light of the dying day,

nor the inward tones of Shakespeare's lines on

The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,

or Wordsworth's on the yew trees :

Beneath whose sable roof
Of boughs, as if for festal purpose decked
With unrejoicing berries—ghostly Shapes
May meet at noontide : Fear and trembling Hope,
Silence and Foresight ; Death the Skeleton
And Time the Shadow ;—there to celebrate,
As in a natural temple scatter'd o'er
With altars undisturbed of mossy stones,
United worship ; or in mute repose
To lie, and listen to the mountain-flood
Murmuring from Glaramara's inmost caves.

The accents of poetry which appeals to audiences on which the 'melodies unheard' of such pure poetry of the spirit are wasted are those of the orator and those of the talker. Byron began in the one ; he ended in the other. His greatest success was achieved when he found a measure—not the Spenserian, though it was with the intention of using it thus to express his varying moods, 'to be either droll or pathetic, descriptive or sentimental, tender or satirical', that he began *Childe Harold*—but the *ottava rima*, in which he could write poetry as he talked or as he wrote racy letters to his friends. But to

say that Byron's serious poems are oratorical in tone is not, it seems to me, to condemn them as *rhetorical* in the depreciatory sense of the word, for the style may be appropriate to the subject, and the sincere expression of the poet's emotion. Pope's *Eloisa to Abelard* is a brilliant exercise in passionate eloquence, yet it is not just *so*, we feel, that love speaks with most convincing power. On the other hand, when Swinburne writes of liberty as though she were his mistress :

Ask nothing more of me, sweet ;
 All I can give you I give.
 Heart of my heart, were it more,
 More would be laid at your feet :
 Love that should help you to live
 Song that should spur you to soar,

one is, I think, justified in asking whether such a strain is as appropriate and effective as Byron's :

Yet, Freedom ! yet thy banner, torn, but flying,
 Streams like the thunderstorm *against* the wind ;
 Thy trumpet-voice, though broken now and dying,
 The loudest still the Tempest leaves behind ;
 Thy tree hath lost its blossoms, and the rind,
 Chopp'd by the axe, looks rough and little worth,
 But the sap lasts,—and still the seed we find
 Sown deep, even in the bosom of the North ;
 So shall a better spring less bitter fruit bring forth.

There are emotions whose source and sphere is the individual soul alone with itself and God, or in individual contact with other individual souls, and the poetry which expresses these is like the still, small voice, not heard but overheard ; but there are also feelings which belong to us as 'political animals', whose source and sphere is national and civic life, the love of liberty, of justice, the passion of power, the hatred of oppression ; and such passions find their fittest utterance in the trumpet tones of the orator.

IV

Love is hardly one of these. Its natural tones are not the strident tones of the orator except at moments when, driven back on itself by conflict or check, it quickens the intellect and makes eloquent the lips with the language of argument and expostulation. But these are the moments which the poet who is also an orator, Corneille or Dryden or Pope in his one brilliant achievement, has always preferred, and most of Byron's entirely serious love poetry is of this kind, vehement and eloquent, not tender and musical. But the eloquence of the lovers in Dryden's heroic plays interests us now only as the

school in which he acquired the splendid and shattering vigour of argument and satire and declamation apparent in the later satires and didactic poems,—the character of Zimri, the panegyric on the Catholic Church in *The Hind and the Panther*. Here was the proper sphere for sonorous eloquence and sustained, incisive ratiocination. And Byron in like manner was revealed for the first time in something of his true proportions when he emerged on the rostrum of the last two cantos of *Childe Harold* as the orator of the world's woes and his own. *Childe Harold*, that is these cantos, and *Don Juan*—these are the two chief pillars on which Byron's fame rests, the two *foci* of his poetry round one or other of which the best of his shorter poems, *Prometheus*, *Manfred*, *Cain*, or *Beppo* and *The Vision of Judgement*, move like satellites which the accidents of an ever-eruptive force have thrown out from the central mass. These are the great representative poems, the one of the orator, turbid, vehement, eloquent, and withal a poet, the other of the most splendid talker and raconteur in English verse. The very scenes which are selected in *Childe Harold* for elaboration show an orator's recognition of telling 'topics'—Waterloo, the Rhine, the Alps, Venice, Rome; Napoleon, Rousseau, Gibbon, Cromwell, Washington, Hannibal—one must recall what these meant to England and to Europe in 1816–17, to the Europe of the Revolution, Napoleon and the Restoration, to an England restored, after twenty years of exile, to the Continent, which had acquired from Gibbon and from experience a new sense of the pomp and pageantry, the dramatic significance and the futility of human history. As a descriptive poem alone, in the tradition of *The Seasons*, *The Task*, and the yet unpublished *Prelude* and *The Excursion*, *Childe Harold* is the greatest of its kind, the noblest panoramic poem in our literature. But this is only one aspect of the poem, the other is Byron himself. Scenes and events and persons are all topics in a great declamation the central theme of which is Byron himself, his wrongs and sorrows and sombre reflections upon life. And the strange thing, if one considers it, is that Byron made his readers feel that he was large enough to stand thus face to face with these sublime topics—the Alps, Venice, Rome, the Sea—and comment in passionate tones, and in a single breath, on them and on himself. In a lesser man, as Rogers, it would have been absurd, and he makes in *Italy* no such attempt. Cowper in *The Task* is an egotist, but the scenes through which he wanders pensively, the windings of the Ouse and level plains of Bedfordshire, have no such place in the history and imagination of Europe. Wordsworth is an indefatigable egotist, but if one can learn to read and enjoy *The*

Prelude as a whole it is because the long stretches of uninspired garrulity are always leading by unexpected ways to sublime and mystical vistas in which Wordsworth's private personality is merged in something greater and more awe-inspiring, the mind of the poet and the seer. But Byron remains himself, his private wrongs and sorrows are ever kept before us, and yet the effect is never absurd, at least never so affects the imagination of the reader, whatever cooler judgement one may pass with Meredith or Arnold on this pageant of the bleeding heart. The closest parallel is Milton, who is always with us throughout his poem, amid the horrors of Hell and Chaos, the glories of Heaven, the sublime pastoral scenes of Eden, who pauses between Heaven and Hell to sing of his own blindness; and is with us, not even as Dante, under the guidance of a master to whom he listens and submits, but as a protagonist in the poem; for Milton is, as a French critic has recently claimed, the true hero of *Paradise Lost*, the only worthy rival of Satan, from the beginning of the poem to the end.

The parallel extends to more than the proud, egotistic personalities of the poets, Milton and Byron, prouder and more defiant even than Dante; it extends to the character of the conflict in which they were, at different times and in different ways, engaged in their serious poems. For the burden of *Childe Harold* and *Manfred*, of *Sardanapalus* and *Cain* is that of *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*; it is the conflict between the will of man and the will of God, the conflict of Byron's sense of sin, interpreted by the Calvinist and Evangelical creed of his upbringing, with at once his pride and his sense of justice.

V

This is the theme which gives a deep human, and a real historic, interest to those poems and dramas, unequal and faulty as works of art, of which the greatest as a poem is *Childe Harold*. It is idle to censure Byron because his Spenserians have not the melody and sweetness of Spenser's—the greatest master of pure melody in our language. His use of the stanza is oratorical—it would be a poor measure that admitted of only one mode of fingering—and if his worst stanzas, those in which he endeavours to argue, are twisted and tormented, in the finest he achieves a richer language, a fuller compass of eloquence than the intolerable monotony of the rhetorical couplet permitted. I am a great admirer of the poetic oratory of Dryden and Pope, but I know no passage of such splendid eloquence, so serious and sublime, in which the changes of mood are so finely managed as the verses on

Waterloo, the finest poem on war ever written. *Childe Harold* must be read, as *The Prelude*, so different in tone and temper, must also be read, as a rhapsody with all the inequalities of a rhapsody. The third canto has the turbid flow of a stream of lava, choked at times with the *d'bris* and scoriae of imperfect phrasing and tortured rhythms, again flowing clear and strong but dark, and yet again growing incandescent in felicitous and magnificent lines and stanzas. The fourth has more of the movement of the Rhine as he describes it, an 'exulting and abounding river', reflecting in its stream the blue of the heavens, the snows and storms of the Alps, the cities and the ruins and the passions of human history, till it loses itself in the 'image of eternity', the sea. Nor is the passion unilluminated by thought, though Byron's argumentative stanzas are his worst. His characters of Napoleon—the sceptred cynic—of Voltaire, Rousseau, Gibbon, are not the work of one deprived of insight. Shelley has rendered better the Napoleon who was a thing, a force, rather than a man:

Napoleon's fierce spirit rolled
In terror and blood and gold,
A torrent of ruin to death from his birth.

Byron sees deeper into the character of the individual man.

What Byron could not attain to, in *Childe Harold* or the poems and plays which continued its personal theme, was the wisdom that could make luminous and harmonize his fierce, troubled conflict. He can make no advance beyond the 'Everlasting No' of *Prometheus*, as a human document a more moving poem than either Goethe's or Shelley's, but as a work of art wanting the golden wisdom and felicity of the older poet's, the ethereal harmonies of Shelley's, that wonderful piece of emptiness ringing and echoing with music, the music of a beautiful soul, *eine schöne Seele*, who can sing but neither comprehend nor create. But Byron could not sing, and *Manfred* is as empty as *Prometheus Unbound* and more tuneless. The poem it most resembles is Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* (which Byron 'never read nor saw'), the finest things in which are greater poetically and dramatically than Byron's poem. But as Faustus is torn between two moods, lust of knowledge and power, terror of the supernatural, which the poet has failed to relate logically and dramatically to one another, Manfred is torn between an inexplicable remorse and an unyielding, inexplicable defiance. The same purely negative attitude baffles us in the two best of his later plays, *Sardanapalus* and *Cain*. In these he draws himself more dramatically, holding himself more at arm's length. *Sardanapalus* is an *apologia* for his own sins of sense. They have not

robbed him of courage if the call to heroic action should come; and what are the sins of sense which society condemns so harshly compared with the sins of cruelty a Christian society is ever ready to condone; what has the sensualist done to compare with the conqueror? Byron's soul, like Swift's, was filled with a *sacra indignatio* when he contemplated the wars and persecutions with which Europe reeked, and reeks, like the arena into which St. Telemachus descended. *Cain* is the most shattering bomb which Byron pitched into the citadel of British orthodoxy, the narrow, literal, scriptural orthodoxy in which the spirit of Evangelical England was imprisoned, from which no troublesome Satanic School of Colensos and critics had appeared to deliver it. Byron was no such critic. He accepts the story as he finds it, in a mood in which childish orthodoxy and the scepticism of Bayle are strangely blended. His criticism is a moral one, an arraignment of the justice of what is thus presented as the revealed justice and wisdom of heaven. But a deep vein of sympathy, of sorrow as well as defiance, has made of Cain and Adah the most human characters he has drawn, a picture of himself drawn not melodramatically but with a mournful understanding, a picture of the one type of woman he not only loved but respected:

My office is
Henceforth to dry up tears, and not to shed them;
But yet of all who mourn, none mourn like me,
Not only for thyself, but him who slew thee.
Now, Cain! I will divide thy burden with thee.

'If you before thought Byron a great poet, what is your opinion now?' Shelley wrote. 'Space wondered less at the swift and fair creations of God, when he grew weary of vacancy, than I at this spirit of an angel in the mortal paradise of a decaying body.' That was not the feeling of orthodox England, whose feelings Byron understood far better than Shelley and who read and felt the charm of Byron's poetry while Shelley was hardly to them a name. To many a pious soul, like Mrs. Sheppard, the Byron of *Cain* was indeed a Satanic figure, but one whose

form had yet not lost
All her original brightness, nor appear'd
Less than Arch Angel ruin'd.

The last of Blake's prophetic works, *The Ghost of Abel*, is dedicated 'To Lord Byron in the Wilderness'. Swinburne wondered why; but clearly Blake, like every one else, had been reading *Cain*, and to Blake Byron's negative, defiant spirit was that of one in the wilderness, one who

had not grasped the eternal truth of the forgiveness of sins. Indeed, Byron might well have become, like Milton, one of Blake's mythical figures, Orc or Los, nailed to the rock of the ten commandments, the 'principles of moral individuality', the double consciousness of sin in himself and injustice in the law which condemns that sin as guilt.

But the glamour and the horror which invested *Cain* have both departed. Neither the orthodoxy which Byron learned from his nurse at Aberdeen nor the scepticism which he learned from Bayle can affect us to-day. The interest of these 'metaphysical' poems is neither that of clear, luminous statement of philosophic thought nor of moments of imaginative vision such as Wordsworth attains to in the Tintern Abbey lines, or Shelley in the closing stanzas of *Adonais*. To that mood in which the restless intellect seems to be laid asleep or to rise to a higher sphere, where for the moment we feel that we see, Byron never attained. In him, as in Donne, the intellect and the imagination are ever involved in too close a conflict. The Spectre (of Blake's mythology) is never laid asleep to let the Emanation move at its own sweet will. The interest of these poems—and that is why I have retraced their connexion with Byron's own experience and thought—lies in their passionate and veracious record of the conflict in one very human soul. Their dramatic interest is greatest when they are most personal. Byron made nothing of historic, disinterested drama in *Marino Faliero* and other plays. But we must not make the antithesis too sharp between the poet who writes of himself and the poet who writes of humanity. When Byron writes in response to a passionate, personal experience, it is then that he is most a poet of the average human heart, more so perhaps than Wordsworth or Shelley in their profounder, but more mystical, more rapt and remote strains. Byron's genuine accents are singularly human. Even in the tales the voice of authentic passion, the passionate heart of man, 'the terrible heart of woman', was audible to Zachariah and other readers through the often imperfect rhetoric. The third and fourth cantos of *Childe Harold* spoke of nature and wars and cities and great men and the futility of human history in tones that seemed to readers throughout Europe a very echo of their own hearts; and the passionate protest of Byron's confused but deadly sincere utterances on evil and guilt and the complacent orthodox interpretation of their significance came home to many on whom Goethe's or Shelley's more philosophic strains were lost.

VI

Byron had no philosophy; but there may be a philosophy in that very want. The advantage is not entirely with Shelley in the scene which Byron described to Kennedy, when, in his room, Shelley and a friend argued with such eloquence on high themes of 'fate, freewill, foreknowledge absolute', that each converted the other. Theoretic philosophies which admitted of such revolutions of opinion made little appeal to his clear and sceptical vision; and if he found no escape by way of the imagination and the heart such as Blake and Wordsworth and Shelley discovered or dreamed they had discovered, he was less prone to identify poetic with real values. If the world of imagination was closed to him he had a firmer hold on the world in space and time, of men and women as they live in the world that is subject to and at war with Urizen, the spirit of natural reason and moral individuality. As a man, he found escape from the confused conflicts of that world, not in any such imaginative vision of the infinite as Blake's, or interpretation of Nature as Wordsworth's, or in Shelley's dream of a golden age when man shall be

Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed, but man
Equal, unclassed, tribeless and nationless.

He found it in the call to heroic action and self-control in the cause of concrete liberty and humanity: 'I am come here not in search of adventures, but to assist the regeneration of a nation whose very debasement makes it more honourable to become their friend'. 'Poverty is wretchedness; but it is perhaps to be preferred to the heartless, unmeaning dissipation of the higher orders. I am thankful I am now entirely clear of this, and my resolution to remain clear of it for the rest of my life is immutable.' And as a poet he found himself, not in 'metaphysical' or historical poems and dramas, but in the only poem of the romantics to which the title of epic may justly be applied. In *Childe Harold* he had given a splendid and impassioned, if unequal and too hastily improvised, panorama of Western Europe, scenic and historical. In *Don Juan* and its attendant satellites, *Beppo* and *The Vision of Judgement*, he wrote the epic of modern Europe, rendering the very spirit of the world of kings and politicians, where men 'sit down to eat and to drink and rise up to play'. And he did so because he had found the proper medium for that blend of gravity and gaiety which he contemplated when he began to write *Childe Harold*, a measure in which he could write as he talked, orally and in correspondence, could express all his keen sense of human life, with

consummate ease and naturalness, in buoyant and moving verse. For when we turn to *Beppo*, *The Vision of Judgement*, and *Don Juan* much of the criticism of Byron's technique becomes irrelevant. In these poems he proves himself master of a style entirely his own, as inimitable as Carlyle's prose, the author of poems as unique in their kind—it may not be the highest kind—as the *Ode to a Nightingale* or the *Ode to the West Wind*. The orator of *Childe Harold* gives place to the talker whose conversation was a 'stream sometimes smooth, sometimes rapid, and sometimes rushing down in cataracts—a mixture of philosophy and slang—of everything.'

Beppo is by far the best of his verse tales, though Byron's art as a story-teller was always improving, and *The Island* is excellent in description—as of the waterfall, on which Ruskin comments—and in the management of the decasyllabic couplet. But to write really well Byron must draw straight from his own experience, and *Beppo* is the record, vivid, dramatic, humorous, of his Venetian experiences. It is the only tale since Chaucer wrote which might stand unabashed among the *Canterbury Tales*, for Byron's genius as a story-teller is more akin to that of Chaucer and Crabbe than to that of Spenser or Keats or Morris. *The Vision of Judgement* is a greater satire than anything of Dryden's or Pope's, because the range of feeling it comprises is wider,—something of the finer fun of Chaucer in the Summoner's Tale and others like it; of the fiercer fun and savage denunciation of Swift:

'Passion!' cried the phantom dim,

'I loved my country and I hated him;'

and a touch of Miltonic sublimity, blended with amagnanimity and pity that are Byron's own, in the interview between Lucifer and Michael. But *Don Juan* is the fullest expression of the later Byron, able in his poetry to be all himself, and the first great quality to note is its variety, the compass, the register of Byron's voice.

Take as a single instance the closing stanzas of the third canto, when the modern Greek has sung, not the

'long low island song

Of ancient days, ere tyranny grew strong,

but the ringing stanzas on the Isles of Greece. What a medley ensues! Poetic fame; Milton and Mrs. Milton; Shakespeare and deer-stealing; Lord Bacon and bribery; Southey and Coleridge and Pantisocracy and the two milliners of Bath; Wordsworth and his 'drowsy, frowsy poem, the Excursion':

'Pedlars', and 'Boats', and 'Wagons!' Oh! ye shades
Of Pope and Dryden, are we come to this?

The 'little boatman' and his *Peter Bell*
Can sneer at him who drew 'Achitophel!'

and then in a trice we are back to the lovers and the hour of evening:

Ave Maria! blessed be the hour!

The time, the clime, the spot, where I so oft
Have felt that moment in its fullest power

Sunk o'er the earth—so beautiful and soft—
While swung the deep bell in the distant tower,

Or the faint dying day-hymn stole aloft,
And not a breath crept through the rosy air,
And yet the forest leaves seem'd stirred with prayer.

Sweet Hour of Twilight! in the solitude

Of the pine forest, and the silent shore
Which bounds Ravenna's immemorial wood,

Rooted where once the Adrian waves flowed o'er,
To where the last Caesarean fortress stood,

Evergreen forest! which Boccaccio's lore
And Dryden's lay made haunted ground to me,
How have I loved the twilight hour and thee!

Soft Hour! which wakes the wish and melts the heart

Of those who sail the seas, on the first day
When they from their sweet friends are torn apart;

Or fills with love the pilgrim on his way
As the far bell of Vesper makes him start,

Seeming to weep the dying day's decay;
Is this a fancy which our reason scorns?

Ah! surely Nothing dies but Something mourns!

To me there is more of the appeal of the human voice in these verses than in the more rapt but shriller or remoter strains of the *Lines written among the Euganean Hills*, so rich in cloud effects, clouds metaphysical as well as physical.

For Shelley moves among the clouds; Byron never quits the earth. This is his second and greatest achievement, to have written a poem which is a poem yet is concerned from first to last with realities and nothing but realities, mundane realities, real persons and scenes and happenings. This is what Shelley himself felt when he wrote of *Don Juan* fulfilling 'in a certain degree what I have long preached of producing—something wholly new and relative to the age and yet surpassingly beautiful'. The effect is so completely realized and with such sustained ease that it is not difficult to underrate it, to think that it requires no imagination but simply the power to record, to feel as though Byron had simply turned into verse the material of diaries and correspondence, like those of Horace Walpole and Lady Mary, as some of it *did* come from Byron's grand-uncle's book and a Frenchman's Russian history. As a fact, few even of the novelists

have achieved the same effect so fully—Cervantes, Fielding, in a measure Thackeray, and, a little under the line, Anthony Trollope. My comparison does not include depth of modelling. The novelists have elaborated more complete characters than Byron's, which are no more than sketches, though vivid and perfectly natural sketches. I refer only to the general and sustained impression of mundane reality, of the form and pressure of life; and I feel that the effect is one of more authentic imagination than *Prometheus Unbound*, for Shelley's scenes and characters have neither the reality of *Don Juan* nor yet the equal or greater reality of the scenes and characters of the *Paradiso*. And this veracity and reality, this not painful but buoyant and vivid realism, animated by many moods, pathos and melancholy as well as humour and irony, includes nature as well as human life. Nowhere is Byron's treatment of nature so felicitous, so natural as in *Don Juan*. The melodramatic, rhetorical note audible in the stanzas on the Alps and on the sea is silent. With Wordsworth's great visionary scenes, the sunrise on the way home from the dance, the frosty evening when

every icy crag
Tinkled like iron; while far distant hills
Into the tumult sent an alien sound
Of melancholy not unnoticed,

or the spectral apparition in the mist among the hills of *The Excursion*, nothing in *Childe Harold* will compare, but in the scene of Haidee's nuptials Nature seems to take the pen and write, in simpler and more passionate, if less pontifical, strains than when she dictated to Wordsworth:

It was a wild and breaker-beaten coast,
With cliffs above, and a broad sandy shore,
Guarded by shoals and rocks as by an host,
With here and there a creek, whose aspect wore
A better welcome to the tempest-tost;
And rarely ceased the haughty billow's roar,
Save on the dead long summer days, which make
The outstretched Ocean glitter like a lake.

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The coast . . .
Lay at this period quiet as the sky,
The sands untumbled, the blue waves untossed,
And all was stillness save the sea-bird's cry,
And dolphin's leap, and little billow crossed
By some low rock or shelve, that made it fret
Against the boundary it scarcely wet.

It was the cooling hour, just when the rounded
 Red sun sinks down behind the azure hill,
 Which then seems as if the whole earth it bounded,
 Circling all Nature, hushed, and dim, and still,
 With the far mountain-crescent half-surrounded
 On one side, and the deep sea calm and chill
 Upon the other, and the rosy sky
 With one star sparkling through it like an eye.
 And thus they wandered forth, and hand in hand,
 Over the shining pebbles and the shells,
 Glided along the smooth and hardened sand,
 And in the worn and wild receptacles
 Worked by the storms, yet worked as it were planned,
 In hollow halls, with sparry roofs and cells,
 They turned to rest; and, each clasped by an arm,
 Yielded to the deep Twilight's purple charm.
 They looked up to the sky, whose floating glow
 Spread like a rosy Ocean, vast and bright;
 They gazed upon the glittering sea below
 Whence the broad Moon rose circling into sight;
 They heard the waves splash and the winds so low:
 They were alone, but not alone as they
 Who shut in chambers think it loneliness;
 The silent Ocean, and the starlight bay,
 The twilight glow, which momentarily grew less,
 The voiceless sands, and dropping caves, that lay
 Around them, made them to each other press,
 As if there were no life beneath the sky
 Save theirs, and that their life could never die.

Is there any love-poetry of the romantics which vibrates with so full a life of sense and soul as these verses? Compared with it, 'I arise from dreams of thee' or 'A slumber did my spirit seal' are the love strains of a disembodied spirit or a rapt mystic. There is nothing like it in English poetry except some of the songs of Burns and the complex, vibrant passion, sensual and spiritual, of Donne's songs and elegies. And considering the descriptive element alone—to use the English language so simply and naturally to produce an effect so vivid, vivid to every sense, and not the eye alone, for one hears the plash of the waves, one feels the cool, strong air of the salt sea-wind, the wet, hard sand beneath one's feet, the glow of the sky in the inner chambers of the soul—to do this seems to me as unique an achievement as to write the *Ode to a Nightingale* or the *Ode to the West Wind*. And Byron does the same kind of thing throughout the poem, in descriptions of interiors as well as of nature, of battle by land and shipwreck by sea, of characters like Julia and Haidee and

Johnson and Lady Adeline, the Duchess of Fitz-Fulke and Aurora, sketches, but extraordinarily natural and vivid. No poem gives such a sense of mundane life as *Don Juan*, and yet it is a poetic effect, for the metre and movement are an integral part of the whole impression. When we call a poem prosaic we mean—we should mean, I think—not only that it lacks some of the highest imaginative qualities of great poetry, but that it would be better written in prose, as is the case with many of Crabbe's tales; that nothing would be lost, there might rather be actual gain, if the vesture of verse were slipt and the story went its way in the naked naturalness and ease of prose. Byron's would lose enormously, for the measure which he manages with such careless power retains all the momentum if not the speed of the earlier octosyllabics, the passion if not the rhetoric of the Spenserians. There are stanzas which vibrate with feeling like the atmosphere on a hot day:

I know not why, but in that hour to-night,
Even as they gazed, a sudden tremor came,
And swept, as 'twere, across their hearts' delight,
Like the wind o'er a harp-string, or a flame,
When one is shook in sound, and one in sight:

and the movement of the whole with its shifting and passionate and humorous moods is neither that of the lava stream to which one might compare the more fiery and turbid stanzas of *Childe Harold* and *Prometheus* nor the broad, heaven-reflecting river of the finer stanzas, but is, as Swinburne described it in his earlier, less prejudiced criticism, the movement of the sea itself: 'Across the stanzas of *Don Juan* we swim forward as over "the broad backs of the sea". They break and glitter, hiss and laugh, murmur and move, like waves that sound or that subside. There is in them a delicious resistance, an elastic motion which salt water has and fresh has not. There is about them a wide, wholesome air full of vivid light and constant wind which is only felt at sea.'

But if Byron's poem, despite its mundane theme and realistic rendering, moves with the passionate pulse of poetry it is because the spirit of the work is *not* mundane. Byron is in the world and yet not of it. He and Shelley were the twin protagonists of Southey's Satanic School. We have cleared Shelley—though Professor Babbitt demurs—and have assigned him a throne and harp among the angels. Byron himself rather suspected the cloven hoof in Shelley. 'Goethe's Mephistopheles', he writes, 'calls the serpent who tempted Eve "my aunt, the renowned snake", and I always insist that Shelley is nothing but one of her nephews walking about on the tip of his tail'.

To Byron, at the same time, Shelley seemed 'the one perfectly unworldly man he ever knew', a man who 'possessed one of the first Christian virtues, charity and benevolence. His benevolence was universal and his charity far beyond his means.' But Byron had no sympathy with Shelley's shrill atheism, or his taste for abstract dialectics. Yet in their relation to the world they are at once poles apart and radically at one. Byron was in the world. He never really rises above the mundane sphere to a vision of the pure ideas beyond. He never came out and stood upon the back of heaven and beheld the world beyond, of which no earthly poet has sung or ever will sing in a worthy manner. Shelley's eyes were dazzled with that vision, or what he took for authentic revelation. But between him and the world to which he desired to speak of what he saw was a dome of viewless glass against which he beat his ineffectual wings in vain. He did not understand the heart of men. He craved for a perfect sympathy which he could neither give nor obtain; and so if he strove, as Professor Moorman says, to rebuild as well as to destroy, it is as one builds castles in the air, or clouds pile themselves up at sunset with burning battlements pinnacled dim in the intense inane. But Byron in the world was as fiercely at war with it as Shelley, and on the same count of 'man's inhumanity to man'. When he left England in 1816 Byron was not yet an active politician, though a Foxite Whig by tradition, a humanitarian by sympathy. Since that time he had learned to view England from the point of view of a continental liberal, had realized the extent to which England had betrayed the cause of liberty in Italy and Spain, had betrayed the cause of justice and reform at home. Hence the scorn with which in the old manner of Dryden and Churchill he reviews in the *Age of Bronze* the politicians and kings of Europe and the Holy Alliance:

those who play their 'tricks before high heaven'.

Ah, how much happier were good Aesop's frogs
Than we! for ours are animated logs,
With ponderous malice swaying to and fro,
And crushing nations with a stupid blow;
All duly anxious to leave little work
Unto the revolutionary stork.

Hence his picture of the landlords of England anguished at the fall of war-time rents:

Safe in their barns, these Sabine tillers sent
Their brethren out to battle—why? for rent, &c.

But *Don Juan* is not only a greater poem than *The Age of Bronze*

but a greater satire, not because of the splendid vehemence of the vituperative stanzas on Castlereagh or the mocking lines on Wellington and others, but because there is less of individual and occasional satire, and what we have instead is a picture of the governing classes of Europe and England by one of themselves. 'It is impossible', he told Kennedy, 'you can believe the higher classes of society worse than they are in England, France, and Italy, for no language can sufficiently paint them'. To paint them as he found them was the main purpose of *Don Juan*, though into that brilliant medley he wove many strands of romance and poetry and philosophy. 'Here they are!' he seems to say, and the poem closed just as he had begun to deal with the society he knew best; 'here they are the brilliant coteries under whom as a great Colossus common men must

peep about
To find themselves dishonourable graves,

in all their external glitter, the same at St. Petersburg as at London, with the cynical disregard for human happiness of their eternal game of diplomacy and war, and under this brilliant surface the one great preoccupation, "the orgiastic whirlpool". The principal object of Byron's satire in *Don Juan*, as of Swift's in *Gulliver's Travels*, is human nature as revealed in the bungled, cruel business of government and war:

"Let there be Light," said God, "and there was Light!"

"Let there be Blood," says man, and there's a sea!

The fiat of this spoiled child of the Night

(For Day ne'er saw his merits) could decree

More evil in an hour, than thirty bright

Summers could renovate, though they should be

Lovely as those which ripened Eden's fruit;

For war cuts up not only branch but root.

.

Suwarrow now was conqueror—a match

For Timour or for Zinghis in his trade.

While mosques and streets, beneath his eyes, like thatch

Blazed, and the cannon's roar was scarce allayed,

With bloody hands he wrote his first dispatch;

And here exactly follows what he said:—

"Glory to God and to the Empress!" (*Powers
Eternal! such names mingled!*) "Ismail's ours".

Methinks these are the most tremendous words

Since "Mene, Mene, Tekel" and "Upharsin",

Which hands or pens have ever traced of swords.

Heaven help me! I'm but little of a parson:

What Daniel read was short-hand of the Lord's,
 Severe, sublime; the prophet wrote no farce on
 The fate of nations; but this Russ so witty
 Could rhyme, like Nero, o'er a burning city.

He wrote this Polar melody, and set it,
 Duly accompanied by shrieks and groans,
 Which few will sing, I trust, but none forget it—
 For I will teach, if possible, the stones
 To rise against Earth's tyrants. Never let it
 Be said that we still truckle unto thrones;—
 But ye—our children's children! think how we
 Showed *what things were* before the World was free!

That hour is not for us, but 'tis for you;
 And as, in the great joy of your Millennium,
 You hardly will believe such things were true
 As now occur, I thought that I would pen you 'em;
 But may their very memory perish too!—
 Yet if perchance remembered, still disdain you 'em
 More than you scorn the savages of yore,
 Who *painted* their bare limbs but *not* with gore.

The poet who wrote these stanzas was as much at war with the world in which he lived and moved as the author of *Prometheus Unbound*, that voice crying in ineffable music

O cease! must hate and death return?
 Cease! must men kill and die?

and he was a more effective fighter. For the Byron of *Don Juan* as of *Childe Harold* was as great as his theme. In the one as in the other one feels that a less potent personality would have been overweighted, been compelled to be either a voice like Shelley singing unheeded outside the haunts of men; or to play with his subject like Moore, a literary mosquito buzzing about the face of the omnipotent politicians and soldiers. But Byron had to be heard and was heard. He was as big as those he assailed. On the stage which Napoleon had quitted Byron's was the least contemptible figure. Milton and Swift are the only other Englishmen of Letters whose writings have been not only literary works but deeds. The former exercised but little influence on the actual course of events, but a careful study of his last poems in relation to the political pamphlets and *De Doctrina* will show that they were more to their author than works of art alone. They were great political acts; declarations by the poet intended to be trumpet-calls to action, a vindication of freedom conceived as obedience to reason and reason only, addressed to the English people and the Christian world, and if

they failed to find such hearing as he desired, it was not because Milton's personality was insufficient to give them weight and dignity. Swift was a pamphleteer, but his pamphlets ended a European war and shook the government of Ireland, and it was not the satire alone which did so but the personality, the fearless pride and strength of the man who launched them. And Byron's voice rang through Europe. His every poem, his every action was an historical event. When he went to Greece it was not only a man and an English peer who went but a power in Europe. Nor is Byron's satire and eloquence disposed of by declaring that his conception of liberty was purely negative, for he was not a metaphysician but a poet and a politician. A free government, says Burke, is, for practical purposes, what the people think so. The Europe for which Byron spoke knew well that it was not free, and understood and appreciated Byron's attacks on Holy Alliances and Congresses better than Shelley's metaphysics or Wordsworth's enlightenment.

VII

The issue between Arnold and Swinburne was the ever-recurring one of the relative values in poetry of technique and inspiration, art and life. It was as a great poetic virtuoso, perhaps the greatest virtuoso in English poetry, that Swinburne poured contempt on Byron's crudities of style, the shortcomings of his Spenserian stanzas, his halting and harsh 'Christabel' measure, his inharmonious blank-verse; and exalted the wonderful achievement of Coleridge's *Christabel* and *Kubla Khan*, the lyrical triumphs of the poet of the *West Wind* and the *Hymn to Pan*. For in the great development of poetic technique, the enrichment of diction and verse, in which Coleridge and Keats and Shelley led the way, to be followed by Tennyson and Browning and the Pre-Raphaelites themselves, Byron had no share. His failure to recognize what Keats and Shelley were in different ways doing; his short-sighted commendations of Campbell and Rogers and Moore, reveal how little he appreciated the revolution in poetic technique that was in progress. 'Keats was not, nor ever will be a popular poet', said Shelley. Keats has been, without any exception, the greatest influence in English poetry for a whole century. To his example and inspiration are due all the wonderful sensuous felicity, the splendour of exotic phrasing and harmony of Tennyson's 1842 volumes; the bold and varied experiments of Browning's *Bells and Pomegranates*; the curious subtleties of *The Blessed Damozel* and *The House of Life*; *The Defence of Guinevere* and *The Earthly Paradise*;

Poems and Ballads and *Atalanta in Calydon*. If poetry be first and last a sensuous pleasure, then Keats and his successors are the greatest of our poets since Spenser, and the Marlowe of *Hero and Leander*, the Shakespeare of *Venus and Adonis* and the 'sugared sonnets'; as virtuosi of phrase and harmonies perhaps greater even than these. Compared with wines of such rare bouquet Wordsworth's simplicity and purity of language and verse tastes no better, if no worse, than a draught from a mountain stream, and Byron's turbulent rhetoric and fierce invective has the effect of such water dashed with whisky or his favourite gin.

But water has been turned to wine, and the wine that the poet pours is a sacramental wine, a spiritual even more than a sensuous pleasure; and such is Wordsworth's poetry at its best. And the poetry and criticism of Arnold were a protest against the over-exaltation in poetry of craftsmanship, of exotic and sensuous beauty, of indifference to subject or even a preference for subjects remote from actual experience, lending themselves to subtle and precious craftsmanship. Hence the stress he laid for a time upon the great subject; hence his tendency to look past the romantic poets with their passionate illusions and intoxicating harmonies and phrasing to Greek poetry in which beauty of craftsmanship was combined with sanity of thought and depth of feeling. Hence the emphasis he laid on Wordsworth as a poet of the soul, and on Byron as a poet, despite all his shortcomings, of actual experience, a poet of the Europe of Castlereagh and the Holy Alliance.

In the main, one may admit that Swinburne was in the right. With all the stress that he laid upon the real as opposed to the personal estimate Arnold's judgements were often even obviously personal. He had not outgrown either the Wordsworthian tradition of his circle—'I am a Wordsworthian myself'—or the Byronic tradition of his youth. He could sympathize with the romantic enthusiasm for Byron of Lord Beaconsfield, perhaps the last great representative in literature and politics of the Napoleonic and Byronic tradition. The appeal to the Continent on which Arnold characteristically relied has gone against him. Byronism is a fashion of the past. Byron no longer interests the French, says M. Estève; and Professor Farinelli tells the same tale of Italy: 'Il narcotico di quei versi che agiva ancora sul Michelet ("Je l'ai dévoré. Impossible de faire autre chose") ha perso ogni efficacia. E pensiamo con malinconia stringente al consumarsi rapido di ogni gloria nostra più fulgida, e al disperdersi ai venti dei tesori di poesia raccolti, che credemmo incorruttibili e eterni.' We have so much to learn, Arnold was ever

insisting, from continental criticism, but continental criticism has of late learned a good deal from us and come to a juster appreciation of Wordsworth and Byron, Shelley and Keats.

And yet Arnold was not altogether wrong when he insisted on the subject as well as the form in poetry, on subject and form as distinguishable but not separable; and therefore the appeal of Wordsworth's spirit of wisdom and contemplation, of Byron's vivid and sensitive reflection of his troubled age. And the proof may be felt by a little reflection on the work of those who arraigned Byron, the poetry of Swinburne, and Rossetti and their school. If the poetic spirit in Wordsworth and Byron is too often obscured by a limited and unequal art, I am not sure that Rossetti and Swinburne are not too perfect artists, too great virtuosi. After the first tremendous impression of the daring as well as the craftsmanship of *Poems and Ballads*, and *Atalanta in Calydon*, the experience of a reader of Swinburne was of growing disillusionment till even *Songs before Sunrise* read as 'a tale of little meaning though the words be strong'. A sense of echoing emptiness haunts the student who turns back on much of the exquisite, exotic craftsmanship of these last of the romantics. Compared with *Atalanta* and *The Blessed Damozel* and *The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon*, Byron's *Childe Harold* and *Beppo* and the best parts of *Don Juan* have at least this advantage, that they read like the record of an actual, vivid experience.

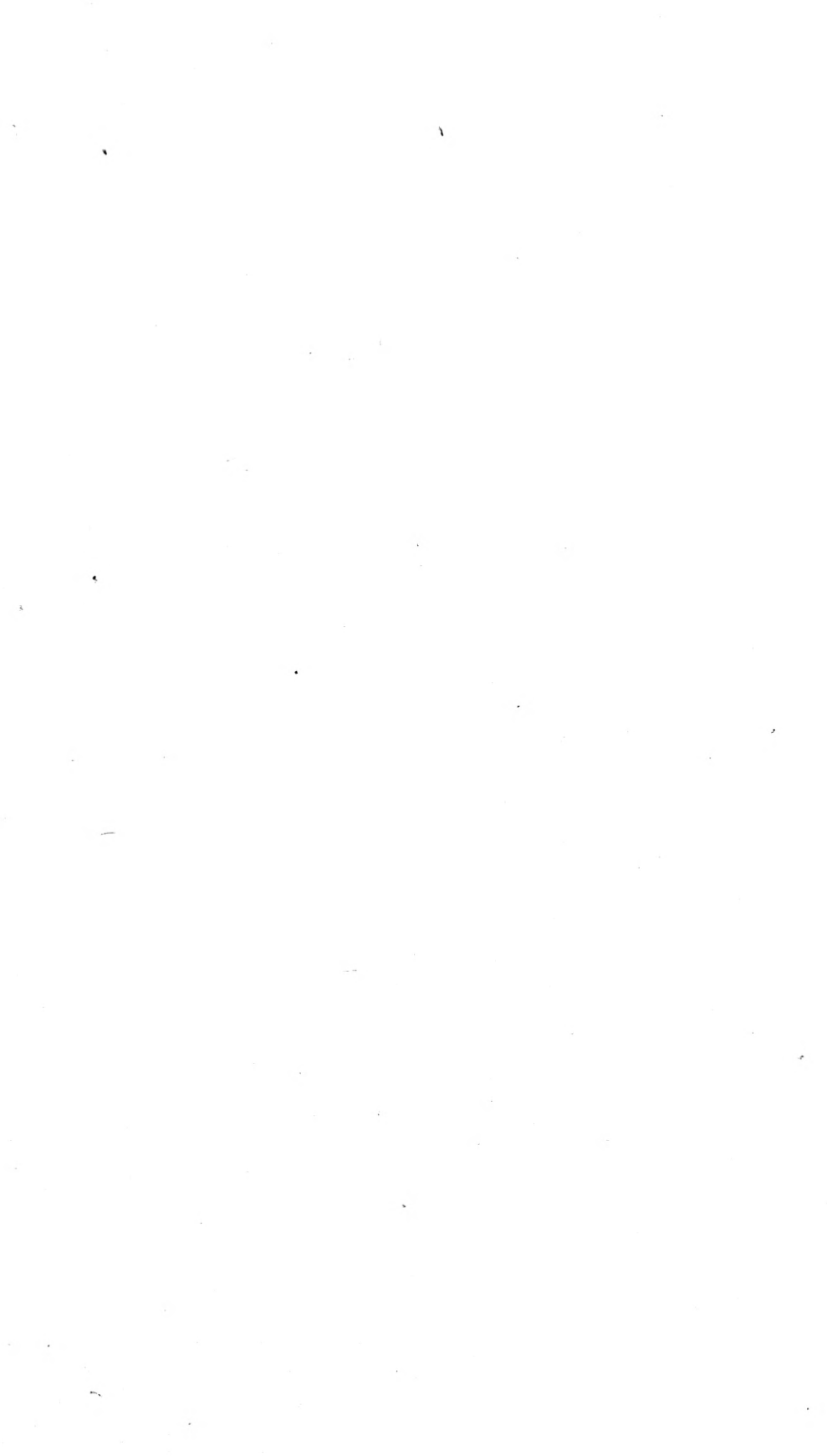
Byron remains a great poet because he did some things that no other poet had done or ever will do; he had certain qualities in a higher measure than any of his great contemporaries. They were not the very highest gifts of the poet, the imagination which transmutes and transfigures, a command of the finest stops in the instrument of the English language. The qualities which he had in a unique measure were passion, humour, and perfect naturalness of expression. 'Quand on voit le style naturel, on est tout étonné et ravi, car on s'attendait de voir un auteur et on trouve un homme'. He realized, more perfectly even than Wordsworth, one of the ideals which that poet was striving dimly to define. He writes poetry as he spoke. His style is free of all convention, of the style, which easily becomes the jargon, of any school, whether of Gray and Collins, of Keats, of Tennyson, or of the Pre-Raphaelites:

For Sir Ralph he is hardy and mickle of might—
Ha! La belle blanche aubépine.

And Byron is one of the small number of greatly passionate poets in our language—Marlowe, Donne, Milton, leaving Shakespeare aside

who is that and so much besides, Burns, Byron, Swinburne, the poets whose best work is written at white heat. They do not appeal to all readers; they even repel some. They have not always the wisdom of more contemplative poets, the tenderness and appeal of less fiery souls. We are not drawn to them personally as some are to Wordsworth, many to Shelley. 'Proud though in desolation masked' Byron describes himself; Shelley as 'a Love in desolation masked', and the overflow of his unselfish passion for his kind turns the music of his verse to fragrance. They have not always a command of the most exquisite language, the most bewitching harmonies. The passionate turbulence and restless wit of Donne's love-poetry seems to some merely harsh and repellent. They have no ear for its great sonorities and harmonies. *Childe Harold* with all its faults is a stream of passionate description and reflection. The love scene on Haidee's isle is the most intoxicating in our poetry since Shakespeare wrote *Romeo and Juliet*.

Passion and humour are blended in Byron's latest poems. One can be misled by the surface cynicism of *Don Juan* and its not infrequent descents to facile and cheap fun. But pure humour and sincere generous passion are its finest qualities, the humour, the love of banter, the passionate hatred of cruelty and injustice which were as characteristic of the real Byron as of the real Swift, with whom he had so much in common. In the house of poetry there are many mansions; and if Byron has been over-estimated and under-estimated, English poetry would be greatly the poorer without his passionate, humorous, in all its register, essentially human voice.



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